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CONGRATULATORY ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE

SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

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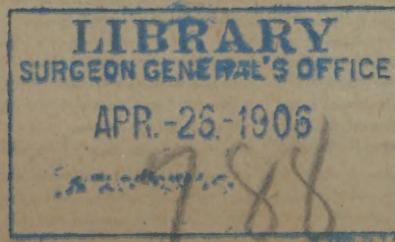
Medical Society of the District of Columbia

AT RIFLES' ARMORY HALL,

WASHINGTON, D. C., FEBRUARY 16, 1894.

THEOPHILUS PARVIN, M. D.

OF PHILADELPHIA.



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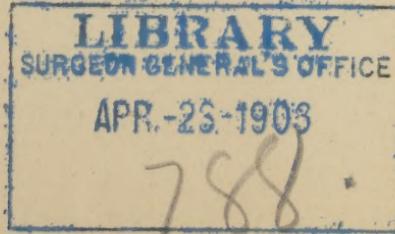
BY THEOPHILUS PARVIN, M. D^r, OF PHILADELPHIA.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to participate in these exercises. It is an honor to address this audience. But honor and pleasure are added in the duty of congratulating the Columbia District Medical Society upon its Seventy-fifth Anniversary.

The Society was born in 1819! That was the birth-year of England's queen, Victoria, and unto you, not by accident or by hereditary right, but by achievement, belongs the name of victory. Ten years earlier than the birth of this Society was that of England's great Prime Minister, Gladstone. So too, in 1809, England's greatest poetess, Elizabeth Barrett, was born. That same year gave our country one who was destined to be among the wisest and most patriotic of Presidents, Abraham Lincoln. It was the natal year, too, of one who, entering the medical profession, did more, by his contributions to a medical journal half a century ago, to avert "a private pestilence" from mother and her new-born, than all the obstetricians in the country; who for many years was an eminent teacher in Harvard, and still more distinguished for his contributions to literature, so that his name is honored wherever the English language is spoken—Oliver Wendell Holmes. Your organization is ten years younger than he who guides the destinies of one of the world's greatest empires—ten years younger, too, than he who is one of the best and most honored of the world's teachers, and who, by his recent lines upon Francis Parkman, has proved that his mind is not clouded or his heart chilled in his ninth decade.

Yet seventy-five years is a long time in the history of a society in this Nation, that only a short time since celebrated the centennial of the adoption of its Constitution. The College of Physicians of Philadelphia is but 32 years older. The number of its active Fellows is 281, and since its organization these have been 586. Its chief pride is in its library, now numbering almost fifty thousand volumes, and its annually published



Transactions. You have had 564 members, and now have 214. In view of such facts one must question the truth of Addison's remark, "We may lay it down as a maxim that when a nation abounds in physicians, it grows thin of people." I am quite sure that I echo the sentiment of every Fellow of the College in hearty congratulation for what you have accomplished, and in bidding you God-speed.

But for the moment I must speak, not for one, but for all the medical organizations invited to participate in this commemoration, in their name bearing meed of praise, and bringing new laurels to crown you this festal night. Nay, more, I imagine there comes from the entire profession of this country, from Maine to Texas, from Massachusetts to California, borne hither from either ocean, sweeping over mountain and valley, over city and hamlet, over prairie and forest, lake and river, harmonious and enthusiastic plaudit.

Every student of American medical literature knows well how many valuable contributions have come from members of this Society, some, most of them, probably because of its existence. Washington men have been the authors of several medical text-books; among the more recent, one upon *materia medica*, the other upon *obstetrics*, have received deserved fame and position. Among the men who have helped me in the department of study and work in medicine that has chiefly engaged my attention for some years, I could mention the names of several of the Washington profession, some living, but others dead.

Thrice the great National medical organization of this country, the American Medical Association, has chosen its president from the members of this Society—these were in order, Lindsley, Toner and Garnett; minor positions in the Association are every year assigned to Washington men.

It is hardly expected that I should speak of the more eminent dead of your number, among these, Noble Young, the Mays, Bohrer, Thomas Miller, Sewall, W. P. Johnston, Stone and James C. Hall. Of the last in this list permit me a word. I am informed that he attended more eminent men than any physician ever living in this country. At one time in his very active life he was the physician of every Judge of the United States Supreme Court, almost every Senator, many Representatives, the President and his Cabinet, and of nearly every Foreign Embassy. He was not only a great and successful practitioner but a true philanthropist, relieving distress kindly, liberally, unostentatiously. In doing alms he obeyed the Divine injunc-

tion, "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth." We may call him and his compeers,

"The kings of ancient days,
The mighty dead, who live in endless praise."

Pardon me if, prompted by many years of personal friendship, I refer by name to two of the living members of the Society in words of loving, and, I believe, just, praise. You, Dr. Busey, have recognized through your many years of busy life, that you were "a debtor to your profession," and honorably and well have you discharged that debt by contributions of sterling value to its literature, and by always seeking its interests, possibly sometimes at the sacrifice of your own, but even then and thus helping others to believe that, as Renan has said, the noblest thing in life is sacrifice. In view of your life and work, permit a layman to repeat a Pagan prayer, first uttered nearly three thousand years ago—may it prove prophecy as well as prayer:

"So peaceful shalt thou end thy blissful days,
And steal thyself from life by slow decays;
Unknown to pain in age resign thy breath,
When late stern Neptune points the shaft with death:
To the dark grave retiring as to rest,
Thy people blessing, by thy people bless'd."

One whose genial manners, generous heart and kindly deeds have endeared him to all who know him; one who has made for himself a name in the profession by important historical researches, and by his large and valuable collection of medical works donated to the public,* has taken no step to perpetuate his name by descendants, unlike the first May, whose son became a physician, and whose son's son is now treading in the footsteps of illustrious father and grandfather. But let us find comfort in the words of Bacon: "Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men, which both in affections and means have married and endowed the public." Married and endowed the public! None forbade the banns, when this member of your Society, not letting his "thoughts, end with himself," and not "accounting future times impertinencies," married and endowed the public. Though Dr. Toner has never "given hostages to society," may he long

*Congress, in acknowledgment of the Doctor's present to the Nation of 28,000 books and 18,000 pamphlets, ordered both his bust and portrait to be made and placed in the Congressional Library—a just and honorable recognition of his great and generous gift.

be spared to contribute to public and professional interests, though still wearing his favorite flower, a bachelor's button!

How much Washington has changed since your professional progenitors instituted this Society. A town of 12,000 is now a city of more than a quarter of a million. I have read that not long before 1819, Congressmen had difficulty in finding lodgings, and that at one time the wife of the President used the audience room of the White House as a place for drying clothes. One can believe that now it is difficult for many lodgings to find Congressmen, and, as to location for drying White House washing, that if Mrs. Cleveland were to do as Mrs. Adams did, there would be a social, if not a political convulsion, and a very uncivil war. There have been great changes here and elsewhere since 1819, changes affecting material comfort, changes in manners, customs, and external observances of society. But all departures from the old are not necessarily improvements, and all re-formations are not inevitably reformations: changes may be external, superficial, and not involving essential character and nature. "When Plancus was consul," was our social life worse than at present? The bowie knife and Bladensburg are now only memories, but are assassins and stilettos unknown at the end of the century, and are those who carry the poison of asps under their tongues all dead? Are there not still selfish, unscrupulous schemers, vile ingrates who rob, or revile a benefactor, shrinking from no falsehood, however base, to blacken his name, as long as they can work in the dark, and reckless slanderers of women? When "Plancus was consul," possibly they would have been promptly called to account for their evil words and deeds. Children may not play marbles upon the front pavement on Sunday, especially when the devout are going to or returning from worship, but the back yard is possibly crowded by urchins, careless of the concealed fractures of the day that escape clerical observation and diagnosis. "When Plancus was consul," was the doctor a better man than to-day, better qualified for his work, with a nobler ideal of his calling, scorning "the tricks of the trade"—the indirect advertising through newspapers, for example, which we now sometimes see, a doctor rushing into print upon the slightest occasion, or making known to reporters, eager for news, his professional exploits? There are doctors who will do anything to be talked about, to have public attention directed to them in order to secure public patronage. Yes, before those days of Plancus, we are told of doctors who "ply for employment

like scullers at Hungerford stairs." Are there not doctors who do this now? Read, too, Smollett's story of "Count Fathom" starting in practice in London,* and the observation of almost any one will give him instances of its essential repetition. The Count bought a chariot, for "this equipage, though more expensive than his finances could bear, he found absolutely necessary to give him a chance for employment; as every shabby retainer to physick in this capital had provided himself with such a vehicle, which was used altogether by way of a traveling signpost, to draw in customers; so that a walking physician was considered an obscure peddler, trudging from street to street, with his pack of knowledge on his shoulders, selling his remnants of advice by retail."

Though so many changes are merely external, not touching the heart, not affecting the real life and character, but having to do merely with the clothes that are worn, I believe in social, as much as in the certainties of medical progress. Faith in man, faith in God, would perish if I did not have this trust.

Certainly, without referring to medical character, medicine has its imperfections, its defects and failures. But let us recall what one of our guild, Sir Thomas Browne, said in answer to this reproach: "There are not only diseases incurable in physick, but cases indissolvable in law, and vices incorrigible in divinity."

It may be objected there are quacks in medicine. Such fact is not peculiar either to the age or to the calling. Izaak Walton wrote more than two hundred years ago, "There are too many foolish meddlers in physick and divinity, that think themselves fit to meddle with hidden secrets, and so bring destruction to their followers." More than one hundred and fifty years have passed since Smollett declared, "We have quacks in religion, quacks in physick, quacks in law, quacks in patriotism, quacks in government."

Our call, my brothers of the profession, is to do our duty to our patients, to our profession, to society, and to God, come reward or reproach, whether our pathway is upon the mountain or in the valley, to live noble lives, even though making sacrifice and enduring trial, bravely and conscientiously seek-

* Dr. Samuel Johnson, in his biography of Akenside, after stating that this doctor and poet never attained professional success in London, remarks: "A physician in a great city seems to be the mere plaything of fortune; his degree of reputation is, for the most part, casual; they that employ him know not his excellence; they that reject him know not his deficiency. By any acute observer, who has looked on the transactions of the medical world for half a century, a very curious book might be written on the 'Fortune of Physicians.'"

ing that the world shall be better on account of our living in it. In old times in Scotland the fiery cross was borne swiftly as strong and agile limbs could go, to the nearest village, and there given in charge of the oldest male representative of the family, the only word spoken to him told the place of rendezvous, and it was his duty to carry it to the next hamlet, there finding a new bearer of this consecrated emblem, and thus on until all the members of the clan were called to the mustering-place: no one could refuse the duty of bearing this cross—new-made bride or unburied father was not excuse—and unto all who failed to respond to the call, the cross became a cross of shame. The doctor bears a cross of fire in life's race, and only when that cross “drops from his nerveless grasp,” and his weary feet falter, and forever fail, is his duty done.

Medicine comes more and more to the front every year, and especially is its power of preventing disease more distinctly recognized. When will our National legislators acknowledge the fact that the health and lives of the people are as important objects for their consideration and care as post offices, and pensions, and the products of forest and farm, of mine and manufactory? When will they establish a department of public health, and place it under the control of a competent medical man, who shall hold equal rank and dignity with the heads of other departments of government? This duty is imperative, and this action ought to be immediate.

In final words I might eulogize the work of the physician, and exalt the honor of medicine. And to this end there could be adduced from Pagan and Christian writers, from the wisest and best of every age, testimonies that would be conclusive. But time does not permit, and I only ask you to listen to the eloquent words of Cardinal Newman, and see how appropriately and necessarily medicine is embraced in his large inclusion: “All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, all that is beneficent, be it great or small, be it perfect or fragmentary, natural as well as supernatural, moral as well as material, comes from God.”

